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A Polish Agent in Place

When Polish authorities cracked down on Solidarity a year ago, Secretary of State Alexander Haig insisted almost defensively that Washington had collected "an acceptable level of intelligence" on the impending crisis. Now NEWSWEEK has learned that for once Haig was too modest: in fact, the CIA had a longtime secret agent who by 1981 had risen to the rank of colonel at Polish Army headquarters. By the time Gen. Wojciech Jaruzelski sent his tanks and troops into the streets, the agency had had a complete copy of his operation plan for a full month. "For a very long time there were very few things that went on at the upper levels of the Polish military that the CIA didn't know about," said one source.

Ironically, the Polish colonel's existence was so closely held a secret that at first almost nothing could be done with the intelligence he provided for fear of compromising him. In Washington, Walter Stoessel, then No. 3 at the State Department and head of the Special Watch group monitoring developments in Poland, was never told that the CIA had obtained the Polish Army's marching orders. He was informed only that reports indicated that Jaruzelski had begun to lean toward an "internal solution."

Invasion: The colonel's greatest service began in the fall of 1980 when labor unrest in Poland first aroused fears of a Soviet invasion. On Dec. 7 the Carter White House warned that a Soviet invasion plan "appears to have been completed." But the CIA's colonel in Warsaw provided reports that cast doubt on the likelihood of a Soviet invasion. The colonel said the Polish Army had no intention of initiating or joining an operation that might end in violence and bloodshed. "It was precisely because of this guy that we knew that the Poles weren't going to act in December," one source said. Without Polish help, the Russians would have needed 40 divisions to invade. Having only 27 divisions ready for action, the Soviets had to wait.

As the crisis wore on into late March and early April of 1981, fears of a Soviet attack increased after Stoessel cited "reliable reports" that the Soviet KGB had instigated disturbances in the Polish industrial city of Bydgoszcz, hoping to provoke a reaction from Jaruzelski. Once again the CIA's colonel offered key insights. He reported that Jaruzelski had refused the KGB's gambit, deciding instead to wait for the guidance of the Polish Communist Party Congress in July. A major influence on Jaruzelski was said to be the dying Polish Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński.

As Poland continued to disintegrate in the summer of 1981, the colonel told the CIA that

Jaruzelski was taking a harder line. Then the colonel reported an even more ominous development: a growing confidence among both Soviet and Polish military men that Polish security forces could handle the crackdown on their own. The prospect of crushing Solidarity without Russian aid relieved Jaruzelski of going down in history as the quisling who turned his country over to the Soviets. It also relieved Soviet fears of harsh Western reaction that would have followed an invasion.

In September, Polish authorities sent the order for a military crackdown—along with leaflets proclaiming martial law—to the Soviet Union to be printed. Their aim was to preserve secrecy, but when the operation order and the leaflets arrived back in Poland, the colonel sent them to the CIA. As time ran out for Solidarity the colonel took huge risks to provide a continuous stream of current intelligence. It almost proved his undoing when the KGB discovered the leak at Polish Army headquarters. The colonel fled for his life, escaping Poland just ahead of the KGB and shortly before martial law sealed the frontier. Today the colonel and family are living safely in the United States.

The colonel's intelligence on the Soviet involvement led to harsher Western sanctions against Moscow but did not avert Poland's tragedy. Had Solidarity been warned that its next challenge to Jaruzelski would trigger a crackdown, union leaders might have had time to go underground. But Solidarity was riddled with government spies. A specific warning to Solidarity would have risked the colonel's life. One of the legends of World War II is that Churchill decided not to defend the cathedral at Coventry against a Nazi air raid in order to protect the Ultra secret: that the Allies had broken the German code. In the cold war of the 1980s, Solidarity may have served as Coventry.

DAVID C. MARTIN in Washington

Warsaw, December 1981: When the armor rolled, the CIA knew the game plan

Chris Niedenthal

